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ABSTRACT

Viewing language as both presentational and representational, or as having both manifest and latent content, can help writing instructors and student writers appreciate its full function and better understand the nature of writing errors. This essential duality of language usage is seen by its functions consisting of unconscious (primary process) and conscious (secondary process), both symbol and symbolized, both revealing and concealing. Apparent mistakes in the formal elements and content may have below-the-surface relationships brought about by uncertainty, conflict, defensiveness, and attendant affect. It is essential for the writer to undergo the transforming experience of seeing his or her other hitherto interior thoughts, aspects of self, exteriorized in writing as Other. By reading a person's own writing for what it says--with its gaps, brisures/articulations/joints, its absences and its presences, its movement along a signifying chain--it is possible for the writer to discover and appreciate this discourse of the Other and incorporate it into an expanded discourse--a discourse of a "Subject Who Knows More," or who comes closer to the full word. (Samples of student writing are included for discussion.) (KEH)

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Errors as Discourse of an Other

by Anne E. Mullin

Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication. Chicago, 3/24/90.

Good Morning!

I'd like to begin our discussion with an example of what I am naming Discourse of An Other --

Hughes and Rodriguez both make two substantial statements that disproves to me that they are "socially disadvantaged" and proves to me it is their lack of confidence and their belief that it is society as a whole holding them back (some people show ignorance though their prejudices at times but never society as a whole).

Obviously, a sentence (!) like this taken out of context presents difficulties when we come to interpret it, but for demonstration purposes, I believe it will do to illustrate the approach I have come to enjoy taking with writing like this. Yes, enjoy -- because since I began to see this kind of writing differently, I have truly begun to appreciate it.

There are different ways to view this writing. If we take a traditional approach, we'll locate the errors and try to help the student writer understand what constructions are wrong and correct them. In this effort we shall be guided by the illuminating research into writing errors -- research that Mina Shaughnessey began and that scholars like Barbara Quint Gray, Valerie Krishna, Collette Daiute, David

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Bartholomae and Mary Epes have continued. We shall, if we adopt Shaughnessy's position, recognize the writer's unfamiliarity with and strained attempts to use "academic discourse" and thus be careful to indicate our respect for the writer's ideas, while seeking to make their expression conform to standard usage. We shall try, for example, to explain to the writer that there is a problem in agreement -- that since she is talking about "two substantial statements" -- thus a plural referent for "that" -- there needs to be a plural form of the verb "disprove." We may try to get the writer to clarify the meaning of the sentence by sorting out its structure -- could she make direct statements instead of the indirect ones? Could she state what the "its" refer to? Should the parenthetical remark be treated as a separate sentence?

We may, following Krishna, suggest getting the main ideas into main clauses instead of pushing them off into subordinate constructions. Or, if we subscribe to Daiute's psycholinguistic approach, we might suggest breaking the sentence into shorter syntactic units to avoid cognitive overload. We might, as Epes and Bartholomae might, ask the student to read the sentence aloud, noting any "corrections" made, attributing discrepancies between the spoken and written forms to perceptual difficulties or first language interference.

We may do any of these things, perhaps all of them, and we may believe that we are successful in helping our student

writers clean up their respective acts. Still, we may wonder why we keep seeing the same kinds of confusion and skewed syntax again, and again, and again. I am suggesting that we can do something more -- something different (differant, even!). I am suggesting that we borrow from other disciplines -- literary criticism and psychoanalysis, especially -- some techniques of interpretation of written discourse.

Ideas about the form and content of written language have been expressed through the centuries by Plato, Sidney, Coleridge, Emerson, Arnold, Eliot and Charles Olson, to name only a few. Ideas about language as symbolization -- with both presentational and representational aspects -- have been worked out extensively by philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer, and Susanne Langer, and by psychoanalysts such as Hannah Segal, Marion Milner and Hans Loewald. And we are all surely familiar with Freud's distinction between the primary process "language" of dreams and slips of the tongue, and the secondary process "language" of conscious intent, which may include symptomatic expressions of repression and censorship. Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva and others in the post-structuralist movement have extended our sense of language through conceptions of Otherness and Desire, Logos and the Word of the Father, difference and deferance, presence and absence, ruptures and articulation. We thus have rich theoretical ground for a workable concensus on the essential duality of language usage: it is both

unconscious (primary process) and conscious (secondary process), both presentational (form) and representational (conveying meaning), both symbol and symbolized, both revealing and concealing.

If we accept this inherent doubleness in the way we use language, then it seems to me we are giving our students (and ourselves) short shrift if we focus our teaching only on one half of the operation -- one half of the coin or "tessera" -- to use Bloom's idiom. And short shrift we will continue to give, even as well-intentioned as we undoubtedly are, if we continue to view errors as the researchers to date have primarily done, as choices of incorrect forms made for a variety of cognitive reasons -- poorly learned rules, mis-applied rules, perceptual difficulties, cognitive overload, primary language interference, and the like.

But if we assume, as I have suggested, the critical and psychoanalytic perspective on discourse as essentially dualistic, then we can also read it in its written form as expressing both manifest and latent content. We can view the manifest content, the formal content in our example as consisting of the plural subject with the singular verbs, the two ambiguous "its" in indirect statements, the way the sentence inside the parentheses is thus attached to or separated from the rest of the sentence, or the fact that what seems to be a main idea (society holds people back) is left hanging, tentatively slipped into an ambiguous participle ("holding"). We can look at these manifest,

formal elements (and we can find more, certainly, but these may do for starters) also for their latent content.

What might such below-the-surface content be? Well, to start with, there may be uncertainty about the true subject of the sentence. Is it Hughes and/or Rodriquez? Is it their two statements? The same statement from both? One different from the other?) Perhaps there's inner confusion about the other ideas tossed in here -- ideas about being "socially disadvantaged", or about lacking confidence, or being held back by society as a whole; perhaps there are internal conflicts about some people as individuals versus society as a whole, conflicted feelings about ignorance, prejudices. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a lack of conflicted feelings on these issues.

So can we ignore the uncertainty, conflict, defensiveness and attendant affect and ascribe the "errors" only to cognitive causes? Even Shaughnessey, for all the sound cognitivist bases of her error analysis, recognized that there could be more unseen origins for errors: "This consciousness (or conviction) of what one means is difficult to describe. It seems to exist at some subterranean level of language -- but yet needs words to coax it to the surface, where it is communicable, not only to others but, in a different sense, to the writer himself" (E&E, p.80).

"Communicable to the writer himself" -- this is possible when the writer becomes the reader of his own writing, and sees what his writing says. The experience of

shifting the stance from writer -- struggling to articulate certain ideas from among the interior swirl of counter-ideas, images, memories, associations, doubts, wishes, fears that continually gyrates through our minds -- to that of reader responding to that written result -- is a monumental one indeed. To appreciate that shift, I have found Lacan's views about Self as Subject, je, and Self as Object, moi, and his fascination with the Stade du Miroir enormously helpful. Lacan devotes a great deal of attention in The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis to the discovery by the child of 18 months to two years in age of his own image in a mirror -- the transforming experience of seeing the hitherto interior-only self/agent as an exterior, visible, manifest Other. So many elements converge in this new insight (outsight)-- recognition of self as other, as both I-subject and Me-object, self as having an outside as well as an inside -- and thus the possibility that others have insides as well as outsides -- one's entire orientation to the world, to others, to oneself, changes irrevocably from that moment. I think this same kind of transformation takes place when a writer learns to see his hitherto interior thoughts -- aspects of Self -- exteriorized in writing as Other.

At one point in Ecrits Lacan says that "The unconscious is the discourse of the Other." I don't pretend to be able to say definitively what Lacan means there (or anywhere else !)?, but I know that it does make sense for me to understand

that our writing may, indeed, present hitherto unconscious, or invisible, "other," aspects of ourselves, just as the mirror image can present aspects of our faces we could not other-wise realize. Thus it makes sense, I believe, to want as writers to understand (apart from purely grammatical issues of nominative versus accusative case for proper pronoun usage) the dichotomy of subject-I and object-me. Our student writers, ourselves as writers, we can all share in a kind of heady re-enactment of the Lacanian Stade du Miroir as we realize that by writing "I" we can create a self, we can "read" that self, we can experience distance or "otherness" from that self, as well as identification with it. A writer can experience the difference between oneself as a Subject Who Knows versus an Object Being Written About. A writer can respond to the written self or the writing self, or the reading self -- or any other of the marvelous possibilities that such a "Eureka" awareness involves. By reading one's own writing for what it says -- with its gaps, brisures/ articulations/joints, its absences and its presences, its movement along a signifying chain -- it is possible to discover and appreciate this discourse of one's Other and incorporate it into an expanded discourse -- a discourse of a Subject Who Knows More, or, to borrow from Derrida, one who comes closer to using the Full Word.

This may be the moment for switching our focus from theoretical concerns to practical ones. How do we read our writing, or our students' writing, or how do they read their

own or their peers' writing with attention to slippery signification or otherness or full words or empty words? I propose that we take heart from a comment Edward White made in a 1984 CCC article, "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing", in which he suggests that writing teachers may find that post-structuralist theory, once we strip away the jargon,. . . "has an almost eerily familiar sound" (191). White notes that student writing gives ample evidence of "the chaotic process of textuality", demands "misreading," and abounds with "sequences of floating signifiers."

It may also be worth noting here, although there is neither time nor need to go into depth on the subject, that there is a great body of research literature on reader response (notably by Shrodes, Rosenblatt, Holland, Bleich, and Petrosky) which applies in classroom settings various psychoanalytic approaches to literary texts. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky built their reading/writing class curriculum (Facts, Artifact and Counterfacts) around this writing self/reading self concept -- although they do not invoke Lacan, their students answer questions worthy of him: "Is the 'I' that is the subject of your paper different from the 'I' that is writing the paper? How?" I am suggesting, then, that we, as writing teachers, can be comfortable using a variety of hermeneutic approaches to student texts. In my classes we do it very simply through frequent and consistent use of sheets that document our

responses to content, form, affect, and expectations for each others' and our own writing. I find this especially useful when we are dealing with so-called "errors."

Let's turn to our sample once again. We have already seen how viewing language as both presentational and representational, or as having both manifest and latent content, can help us appreciate its full function. Now let us look again at the example before us for its Self-Otherness. The student who wrote these lines (A) had done some self-reponses during her writing process. Early on she had written the following (Item B) in response to some freewriting she had done right after reading Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" and "Aria", the first chapter in Hunger of Memory by Richard Rodriguez:

> Theme for English "B" repeat over his uneasyness and lack of confidence because of his color. Also I keep hearing that he too is an American no matter what race he comes from but he feels he too is "socially disadvantage" . . . I commented to Rodriguez that we are all socially disadvantage. I get anger sometimes when occurances happen that concerns inter-racial people and the minority always cries racism sometimes it is true but other times I believe it to be an "escape goat" and the whites are blamed.

In this writing, it seems that the "I" is positioned in opposition to the "Others" that make her angry. Others are those who lack confidence, protest social disadvantage, who cry racism. But there is that interesting "we" clause in the middle -- "we are all socially disadvantage(d)".

Let's look at the next item, (C) written in response to and turned in with her final draft (A):

> I want to become more of an confident person. I don't want to hold myself back from anything because of a lack of confidence.

In these two bits of writing we can see the "I" moving toward recognition of its own Otherness -- its lack of confidence. This Otherness also extends, we note in the writing, to serious concerns about racism, and blame, and "escape" goats, and feelings of being socially disadvantaged -- concerns, I submit, that intrude and muddy up the discourse we are looking at. Recognizing the presence of this Other -- (the trace, if you like) --in her writing, led the student to articulate it -- to join with it -- when she stated "I want to . . . . I don't want to . . . .". Recognizing her recognition led me to comment in my response to the student:

> I'm drawing on your notes here. Maybe the issue underlying this essay is confidence -- your wishing to be self-confident, your impatience with people like Hughes because they remind you of your own insecurity -- your impatience with Rodriquez because he's using the excuse of "socially disadvantaged" . . . would your writing flow more "confidently" if you were writing what you really wanted to?

(I need to tell you that I had also noted the agreement problems and suggested that separating what she wanted to say about Hughes from what she wanted to say about Rodriguez would help the paper in other ways, also.)

In her revision, the student did discuss the Langston Hughes poem and the Rodriguez chapter separately, and made different points about each. She was also able in her introduction to discuss the two together, while

acknowledging her own Other -- or by now I guess we would have to acknowledge it as a Self, no longer latent, but taking its position as Subject Who Has Something To Say:

> Theme for English B by Langston Hughes and Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood by Richard Rodriquez each present an overall theme of a search by two individuals to be recognized as Americans. Both individuals, Hughes and Rodriquez, are minorities growing up in America. Unfortunately, each one prolongs his search for recognition by making excuses why he is not treated as American. I feel they both should stop making excuses and gain the advantages of the opportunities America offers. Many individuals disagree with those previous feelings of mine of the excuse-making of Hughes and Rodriguez. My reasoning of my strong feelings against Hughes and Rodriquez is that I do not have the patience to stand by and witness people making excuses for their difficulties because they can fall back on the argument of the presence of inequality. I do want to make it clear sometimes inequality is a hindrance, but Hughes and Rodriquez make too many excuses to say inequality is holding them back.

Of course there are still problems in this revised writing, but we do not see the confused subjects, the agreement problems, the ambiguous "its," or the extent of subordination difficulty that we saw originally. I believe this version more clearly says what the writer wants to say. I believe that the discourse of the Other, while it is still there (this writer has many still-to-be-dealt-with prejudices and defensive attitudes), is less disruptive -- is causing fewer "errors" --in this version because it is more fully acknowledged.

I don't believe that the writing classroom is a place for psychotherapy, nor do I believe that a writing teacher can impose a change of prejudiced or intolerant attitudes. I do believe, however, that the writing classroom is the place to examine language use in as many ways as we can. And one

of those ways, surely, is by attending to the "Discourse of the Other."

HANDOUT -- DISCOURSE OF AN OTHER

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A. (final draft, Assignment #4)

Hughes and Rodriguez both make two substantial statements that disproves to me that they are "socially disadvantaged" and proves to me it is their lack of confidence and their belief that it is society as a whole holding them back (some people show ignorance though their prejudices at times but never society as a whole).

B. (self-response to pre-writing notes)

Noted under Form: Theme for English "B" repeat over his uneasyness and lack of confidence because of his color. Also I keep hearing that he too is an American no matter what race he comes from but he feels he too is "socially disadvantage". . .

Noted under Affect/Associations: I commented to Rodriguez that we are all socially disadvantage. I get anger sometimes when occurances happen that concerns inter racial people and the minority always cries racism sometimes it is true but other times I believe it to be an "escape goat" and the whites are blamed.

C. (self-response to A

Noted under Affect/Associations: I want to become more of an confident person. I don't want to hold myself back from anything because of a lack of confidence.

D. Introduction -- Assignment #5 (revision of a prior essay)

Theme for English B by Langston Hughes and Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood by Richard Rodriguez each present an overall theme of a search by two individuals to be recognized as Americans. Both individuals, Hughes and Rodriguez, are minorities growing up in America. Unfortunately, each one prolongs his search for recognition by making excuses why he is not treated as American. I feel they both should stop making excuses and gain the advantages of the opportunities America offers. Many individuals disagree with those previous feelings of mine of the excuse-making of Hughes and Rodriguez. My reasoning of my strong feelings against Hughes and Rodriguez is that I do not have the patience to stand by and witness people making excuses for their difficulties because they can fall back on the argument of the presence of inequality. I do want to make it clear sometimes inequality is a hindrance, but Hughes and Rodriguez make too many excuses to say inequality is holding them back.

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